

## DISCOVERY OF AMERICA.

## THE TITLE OF THE GENOESE DISPUTED.

WAS AMERICA DISCOVERED BY BUDDHIST MONKS?

AN INQUIRIOUS COLUMBUS? or Evidence that Hui Shan and a Party of Buddhist Monks from Afghanistan Discovered America in the Fifth Century, A. D. by EDWARD P. VISING, D. Appleton & Co.

The possibility that the travels of Hui Shan and his companions in the fifth century may have led them to this continent has been considered by several geographers, each of whom has named his favorite theory to defend, but it has remained for Mr. Vising to gather together all that has been written on the question, and to analyze and compare the arguments of his predecessors with a care and thoroughness which virtually exhausts the subject. The difficulty in interpreting these Chinese records consists in the fact that the Chinese names given to the countries visited by the Buddhist pilgrims are either arbitrary and fanciful, or relate to some local designations long ago obsolete and forgotten, so that the modern student has to seek identification as best he may by the descriptions of the people, fauna and flora of the various regions referred to. And since, fifteen centuries ago, all travellers were apparently as credulous and as loose in their statements as Mandeville, it is necessary to winnow their narratives thoroughly, and to separate the purely fabulous from the actual. This, of course, is a very difficult task, and the clarification of the old travel stories a dubious and uncertain business, no matter what the diligence and patience brought to the task. The uncertainty in the variety of the descriptions is shown in the Chinese of the conclusions reached by the modern investigators as to the identity of the countries called by the Chinese Fu-sang. Some have thought it Japan; others have sought it in the Philippines; and the descriptions of Hui Shan; and Mr. Vising has undertaken to prove that it really was Mexico. According to his interpretation the route of the march was from China to Japan, thence to the Aleutian Islands, and from there across to the American coast about California, and so down the shore-line to Mexico. In support of this theory he makes voluminous citations concerning the habits, customs and natural products of those countries, and compares the facts with the narrative of the Buddhists.

Though this narrative is painfully obscure on many points, and though not a few of the things related will fit in with no country or people now or at any time known to civilized inquirers, the general tendency of the analysis is to the hypothesis. The *Fu-sang* tree, which has puzzled everybody, does indeed seem to be irreconcilable with all known species save and except the Mexican mahogany or agave, and this is a decidedly strong point. Another significant one is the fact that Hui Shan speaks of the people of Fu-sang as having the peculiar custom of suffocating their criminals in ashes. Now this is plainly a good clue, since very few people can have had such a custom. In fact but one nation is known to have practised this punishment, and that is the ancient Mexicans. Mr. Vising makes a brave endeavor to prove that the Mexicans had a tradition of the visit of Hui Shan and his companions. His evidence certainly shows that there was a tradition of such a visit, but obviously it must be impossible to show in anything more than a conjectural way that specific persons were referred to in the legend. The growth of such records, among savage and semi-civilized people, makes it evident that no reliance can be placed upon such matters, viewed as testimony, though they may sometimes be accepted in corroborating better attested facts. This, however, is but a slight drawback. For the most part Mr. Vising's evidence is both clear and cumulative. The negative argument, to show that Fu-sang could not have been Japan, may be regarded as equally conclusive. The "probability" that the "country of marked bodies" was the Aleutian Islands is only weakened by doubt as to whether the islanders could have possessed the measure of civilization attributed to the people with marked bodies. Still, it is quite possible that these islanders have remained stagnant, or even retrograded somewhat, in the past 1,500 years, and the increasing severity of the climate, if demonstrated, would account for this.

Hui Shan's account of the part of this continent he must have first visited corresponds closely enough with Alaska, but Mr. Vising does not seem to have given much attention to the consideration that the region referred to appears to have been very thinly if at all inhabited from 1,000 to 1,500 years ago. It is when we come to the land of Fu-sang, however, that the strength and closeness of the analogy is developed, and though occasionally some almost staggering difficulty is encountered, on the whole the comparison proceeds smoothly and prosperously, and with satisfactory results. If the Buddhist priest in describing the religion of Fu-sang fell into errors which render recognition of the creed so metamorphosed almost impossible, it must be remembered that the similar mistakes have often been made by Western travellers in attempting to give accounts of the customs of strange people. An educated Hindu, for example, would scarcely recognize his own religion in the curious travesties of it which have until quite recently been presented to the Western World. But when we pass to matters of common observation and natural products, the resemblance between Fu-sang and Mexico grows more marked, and is often striking.

As to Mr. Vising's attempt to show that Hui Shan, in speaking of the "Country of Women," refers to the monkeys of Southern Mexico when he says, "Its people's manner of appearance is straight erect, and their color is a very pure white," we must consider it a strained interpretation. Certainly monkeys do not walk erect. To say that they are "straight" in their carriage would never occur to an intelligent observer. Neither are they white, still less a "very pure white." Nor can we believe that Hui Shan would speak of white fur as of a complexion. Some remarks of the Chinese author are more capable of being given an air of correspondence, but the whole monkey theory seems to us a mistake arising from excessive enthusiasm in the pursuit of an otherwise happy idea. It is in regard to the Mexican customs that the most remarkable coincidences occur, and there is no danger of overrating the sentimental value of the correspondence. To say that Hui Shan could not have said what he did concerning any other people than the Mexicans, is in effect to say that Mr. Vising has made good his undertaking, yet really no less can in justice be admitted. Japan being excluded as a possible Fu-sang, America is the only country that remains, and in America Mexico is the only country the facts of which correspond with the narrative of the Buddhists. Mr. Vising has thought it necessary to bring together all that has been written on his subject, and while he has thus prepared a valuable work of reference it is clear that the bulk of his materials and the diffuseness of the treatment militate against the popular dissemination of his theory.

It is, moreover, very easy to overestimate the importance of such a question. Let it be granted that Hui Shan discovered America a thousand years before Columbus. What significance is there in the fact? Such a voyage is not in any true sense to be regarded as the discovery of a country. A traveller finds his way to a new country, and goes away, leaving no mark. The discovery of Columbus was followed by the settlement of the country and its conquest by a more vigorous and aggressive race. We talk of the discovery of gold in California and Australia, but we never mean the first discovery, which in both cases was made by the natives. They, however, made no use of what they had found, and the mines lay idle until white men came and rediscovered them; and then, for the first time, they were utilized. The so-called discovery of America by Hui Shan, if fully established, merely serves to emphasize the essential distinctions between the Occidental and the

Oriental races. It was not in China to turn to any profit such a discovery, but in the hands of Western peoples it produced the most important results. There is no danger that the Chinese Buddhists will detract Columbus. America was not really discovered until he achieved the enterprise. A hundred travellers might have come and gone—possibly did come and go—in preceding ages, leaving no mark upon the land. Columbus came, and thenceforth the history of America was changed.

Mr. Vising has shown great patience and energy in compiling this work. He has probably settled the question affirmatively on behalf of his authority. But he should not suppose that all with ancient and bootless discovery infers at all with the significance or the merit of the Genoese navigator, who must ever remain, because of the consequences of his enterprise, the real discoverer of the continent.

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